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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the use of a bereavement support group within the high school to provide an effective intervention for students who have experienced the loss of a significant family member or close friend. The first section examines the impact of parental loss on adolescents, noting that the loss of a parent might involve significant changes in the adolescent's support system, living situation, and possibly financial status; and that divorce can be a complicating factor in adolescent adjustment to the loss of a parent. The next section discusses the importance and benefits of a support group for grieving adolescents. The next section focuses on forming a bereavement support group, addressing such issues as referrals for group members, organization of the group, and screening of potential members. Group structure and process are examined in the next section. As the primary goal of the support group is to facilitate the tasks of mourning, these tasks are described in the next section: acceptance of the reality of the loss; effectively coping with the affect of grief; readjustment; and emotional withdrawal from the deceased. The final section of the document discusses a variety of group topics. (NB)

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USE OF A BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT GROUP TO HELP ADOLESCENTS COPE WITH LOSS

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Use of a Bereavement Support Group to Help Adolescents Cope With Loss

Estimates suggest that five percent of the children in the United States (approximately 1.5 million) lose one or both parents by age 15. Acceptance of the loss of a parent can present a challenge at any age, and students who have experienced the loss of a significant family member or close friend can be at risk for difficulties in school. Normal grief reactions can interfere with classroom functioning and affect interpersonal relationships. Developmentally, adolescents have matured to the point at which they are fully capable of cognitively grasping the mortality of themselves and others. However, because of issues they often face regarding their identity and sense of autonomy they can be especially vulnerable to the loss of a significant other.

This paper describes the use of a bereavement support group within the high school setting to provide an effective intervention for these students. Understanding peers, who share the experience of loss, can be especially comforting to the developing adolescent. The group setting, which helps the student feel less isolated as they cope with the situation, can provide assistance from peers in working through normal stages of grief. Sharing experiences and memories about loved ones can help students explore feelings and verbalize grief within a safe setting. Peer support can assist the adolescent in identifying acceptable ways to express emotions. And, group support can be especially helpful in coping with

specific difficulties such as holidays and anniversaries, or the adjustment to changes in living situations which can occur for adolescents who have lost a parent. This presentation covers information regarding group issues and topics, basic information about adolescent grief, and offers suggestions for managing the logistics of a bereavement support group within the high school setting.

The Impact of Parental Loss on Adolescents

Loss of a parent can present some particularly difficult challenges of adjustment for adolescents. At this age, loss of a parent is often the student's first significant encounter with death. As one teen expressed, she had little awareness of the cemetery they would routinely pass when driving in the car with her parents. And, she had certainly not anticipated or even begun to consider that her father would be buried there following his sudden heart attack. Parental loss is not only a significant experience at this age, but it is an experience adolescents often feel they do not share with others. They often feel that friends don't understand the experience or the impact which it has on them.

Loss of a parent might involve significant changes in the adolescent's support system, living situation and possibly financial status. One parent is no longer available as a source of support in helping the child cope with life's challenges. And, depending on the specific situation, parental death might result in loss of the student's primary source of emotional support. Financial consequences of parental death might necessitate a family

move, which requires further adjustment for surviving children. Surviving family members are often faced with increased responsibilities as they must take over the role and responsibilities of the deceased.

As a result of the death of a family member, adolescents are often faced with less available support at a time when they are most in need of assistance from family and friends. Many times surviving family members are faced with their own tasks of adjustment, and as a result might be less available to assist the student in coping. Children are often reluctant to upset other family members by expressing their own issues and concerns. While adolescents typically rely on peers for social support, they are often faced with friends who do not understand their experience and have limited tolerance for coping with grief responses.

Divorce can be a complicating factor in adolescent adjustment to loss of a parent. Depending on the specific situation and living arrangements, death of a parent might involve a move from a custodial to noncustodial parent. In some situations the child might not have lived with the surviving parent for years, and there might be specific reasons why they had not previously done so. In addition to grief regarding the parent's death, earlier issues and feelings regarding the divorce often resurface. In some situations the surviving parent is less able to understand and cope with the child's feelings of loss. And, unfortunately in some single parent families death of a parent can involve alternative living arrangements, where surviving children might be cared for by

friends of the family. In these type of situations the adjustment to new living arrangements and the task of coping with previously existing problems are added to the tasks of bereavement.

The Importance of a Support Group for Adole ents

Adolescents are often quite sensitive to their grief reactions and at times will question whether their behavior is normal. Information regarding the range of typical grief responses can be quite reassuring. And, within the group setting students are likely to feel less isolated as they realize that others share the same experiences.

Groups can provide an additional support system for adolescents whose family systems are taxed by the adjustment to loss of one of their members. Beyond the additional support, groups can offer broader exposure to a range of coping methods, which might be different from those utilized by the family. Students are able to share coping techniques in their attempts to deal with similar situations. Group leaders can function as models for students, and provide opportunities for students to see how one might cope with death as a normal developmental proces.

A group can also provide extended support after the funeral. Initially, while experiencing the shock of the death, there is often support available from extended family, neighbors and friends. But, as others resume their normal lives this support declines just as the bereaved begin to experience the normal grief reactions of anger, sadness, and guilt. Given the time typically required to resolve grief, extension of available support is

realistic and possibly necessary to facilitate effective coping with long term reactions, such as those involving holidays and anniversaries of the death. As one student expressed it, "It isn't that you get over your grief at a certain point. It's still there, it just changes with time."

Forming a Bereavement Support Group

Referrals can be obtained from a range of school staff. Administrators and guidance counselors are often aware of students who have experiences significant losses. Teachers also might be knowledgeable of their students' experiences. Secretaries, who often know the community well and have direct contact with parents, can be a valuable resource for identifying students in need of support. Custodians, cafeteria staff and bus drivers also have contact with students and families outside of the formal classroom setting. And finally, students who have experienced a major loss are often sensitive to others who are going through the same thing.

Organization of a bereavement group should involve notification of teachers and contact with parents to obtain their support. Parents often respond positively to the additional support. And, teachers are often sensitive to difficulties experienced by these students, even when they are unsure themselves how to best respond to the student and the situation.

Diversity in age, sex, race, socioeconomic status can enhance the group. Special education students, who might have limited verbal skills, can benefit from the experience of hearing others talk about their feelings. The common experience of loss and grief

reactions often help students bridge differences that otherwise might limit their interaction within the school setting.

Diversity in experience can foster sharing and facilitate students helping others. Often the common experience of grief overshadows differences in circumstances which might range from accidental death, to terminal illness, suicide or even murder. Students who have lost a parent through an extended illness can be quite sensitive to the difficulties faced by others who had little advance warning, as occurs for example with an accidental death. At times it can be easier for students to recognize issues in situations which differ slightly from their own before they are able to face their own personal concerns. By hearing the experiences of others, some students will even begin to express the view that their own situation was really not so bad in comparison. The inclusion of students in various stages of grief can also be beneficial. It can be reassuring to students in the initial stages of grief to hear from others that things can improve with time.

With adolescents, it is also not surprising to have students express interest in a bereavement group even though it has been several years since they experienced the loss of a parent. Death experienced at a younger age is likely to be reviewed and worked through at this stage of development. Often questions arise regarding specific circumstances of the death or characteristics of the deceased. Specific information about the death is often not shared with young children. Yet, as children get older and begin to question the circumstances of the death or express curiosity

about the deceased, other family members typically have less interest in or motivation for reviewing this information from the past. As a result, even though the death was not recent, the adolescent can have an even greater need for opportunities to express their grief and work through the loss.

When forming a group it is important to screen potential participants by meeting with them individually to insure that students who are primarily encountering normal grief reactions are included. Students who are exhibiting extreme denial or acting out behavior should be referred for more intensive counseling than is available in a general support group.

Group Structure and Process

The use of group co-leaders can be quite helpful to share the work of organizing a group, insure that the range of group concerns is adequately addressed in meetings, and facilitate availability of individual support outside of group meetings if needed. Issues such as the schedule of meetings, length of group activity and topics should be addressed with group members. The success of adolescent groups can be affected by their perception of ownership. When they have had significant input into the formation of the group they are more likely to view the activity as their own. And, this might promote more effective use of the group experience in addressing their own needs.

Sensitivity to the needs of the group members is also critical in effectively directing group activities. There might be times when the group is better able to express their grief. Yet at

other times they might be unable to cope with the intensity of the emotions, and unwilling to address more difficult issues regarding their loss. We typically view adolescents as capable of cognitively comprehending death, and as emotionally mature enough to grieve their loss. Adolescents are able to grasp death as inevitable and irreversible. They are able to conceptualize the future in terms of potential losses. However, adolescents still might have difficulty sustaining the intense emotions of grief over time. Therefore, fluctuations in their behavior similar to those of a younger child might be observed. While at times they might express intense grief reactions, at other times group interaction might focus on normal adolescent socialization. The introduction of specific topics can depend upon the capacity of group members to cope with the emotional material at that time. While the opportunities to address their grief are important, it is equally important to allow sufficient opportunities for group members to still function as normal adolescents.

Tasks of Mourning

The primary goal of the support group is to facilitate the tasks of mourning. These tasks include: Acceptance of the reality of the loss; Effectively coping with the affect of grief; Readjustment; and Emotional withdrawal from the deceased. While it is not the purpose of the group to insure that these tasks are accomplished, the group can play a major role providing a setting in which individual students can pursue these tasks. And, group activities can help facilitate accomplishment of these tasks.

Opportunities to talk about the loss and express emotions help facilitate acceptance. By reviewing the situation and specific events which occurred, students are more likely to grasp the reality of the loss. While adolescents are often able to recognize the loss intellectually, there is often a lag in emotional acceptance. The bereaved adolescent can verbally acknowledge the loss of an important person in their life. But, there are often continued beliefs that it was all a mistake and one day the deceased will surprisingly reappear. For one student whose mother had been a truck driver, this resurfaced periodically in the belief that perhaps her mother had not really died in a fire but would instead eventually return from a long trip.

The support group can provide a safe setting for students to explore and express the intense emotions regarding their loss. Identifying and expressing emotional reactions can help adolescents come to terms with their grief. At times emotions such as anger might be expressed indirectly. This might be seen for example in terms of the relief experienced that the person died, or in the recollection of specific characteristics which the student does not miss about the deceased. Guilt is often expressed in terms of feelings that the survivors did not do enough or are not feeling sad enough about the loss. Support from the group can be helpful to confirm that the survivors did everything they could, and that there are no set standards regarding how one must grieve the loss or how sad one must be. When feelings of anxiety and helplessness are expressed, group members can offer reassurance in recognizing

how the individual managed on their own before the loss, and how they have coped with the subsequent challenges. And finally, it is important for adolescents to receive some confirmation that it is acceptable to cry and experience feelings of sadness.

Readjustment can present a particular challenge for adolescents. By identifying changes and problems resulting from the loss, students can begin to problem solve in identifying different approaches to cope with their situation. Group members can be especially helpful in generating possible solutions and providing support for individuals as they try out various solutions.

The final task of emotional withdrawal from the deceased and reinvestment in other relationships is likely to occur well after the group has ended. However, the support group can help build the foundation for accomplishment of this task. Group members often help confirm difficulties trusting and relying on others after experiencing a significant loss. As one student expressed, "It's hard to get close when you realize you could lose that person." They can also offer support when individuals are faced with guilt over replacing the deceased with other relationships. And, the relationships within the group can help provide the foundation for new relationships in which the survivor can reinvest his or her energy. Some students might show signs that they are approaching this goal. During the course of the group it might become apparent that some students interest and involvement in group activities is waning. At this point they are often beginning to reinvest energy

in other social activities which are not directly related to their loss.

Group Topics

As mentioned above, adolescents might fluctuate in their capacity to cope with intense grief reactions. While at times they might display intense emotions regarding their loss, other times they might be quite involved in typical adolescent activities and concerns. At times it can be rather surprising and unnerving to attend a group meeting only to hear the latest in who is going with whom to the prom or an account of the recent football game. Yet in subsequent meetings students might share highly personal reactions to the deceased funeral or initiate discussion of their fears regarding future loss. Following a period of socialization in the group we had one student voluntarily share particularly a painful experience at her mother's funeral when she broke down in tears and threw herself on her mother's coffin. Other students then shared their own experiences regarding the funeral of the deceased, about which they had previously been reluctant to talk.

With adolescents it is important to make information available regarding specific topics and help students develop topics which are relevant to them. However, we do not recommend proceeding through a set schedule of topics in a specific order. Just as each student grieves in their own way, each group of students will address specific issues at their own rate and in their own order depending on their capacity to cope with the material. Therefore it is advisable to maintain flexibility in the schedule of topics

and overall structure of the group activities. Otherwise, it is likely that you will encounter resistance on occasions when the students are not ready to address the scheduled topic.

The initial group meeting is important for obtaining input from students regarding issues such as scheduling, structure, and defining basic group rules. This is also an important time for the group members to begin general sharing with others regarding their loss experience. Sharing of basic information can include who the student lost, when, and how. This theme will re-emerge at different levels within the context of the different topics. At times sharing might involve specific activities, such as bringing in pictures of the deceased, sharing a special memory, etc.

The initial meeting should also include some basic information about the nature and range of normal grief reactions. It can be reassuring for adolescents to understand that grief is an individual though universal process. While many of them might share the same experiences, there is no single way to grieve. Adolescents need to know that their feelings and reactions to loss are normal, and that they do not have to react in the same manner as others.

Students often respond in the initial meeting with a sense of relief, that they have a place where it is acceptable to talk about the deceased. Some students welcome the opportunity to finally be able to freely talk about their experience and feelings without making others feel uncomfortable.

The topic of peer relationships is often a good topic for

groups to address initially. This is typically less threatening than other grief issues but highly relevant for adolescents. Most teenagers are highly sensitive to reactions from their peers. Many adolescents report feelings that friends distance them, that peers don't know what to say to them and are often uncomfortable in conversation. Even with close friends, many adolescents share reservation about expressing the intensity of their emotions. And, they often feel that their friends eventually become tired of hearing about their loss over time.

Family relationships is another important topic which is highly relevant for adolescents to explore. Loss of a family member can have a substantial impact upon the relationships, roles and responsibilities of surviving family members. Adolescents need the opportunities to explore the changes in living situation, financial status and support which might have resulted from their loss. This can involve exploration of how other family members are coping with the loss, and can help the student become more aware of their reactions to other family members. Probably one of the most commonly expressed concerns among children is their concern about the surviving parent, particularly the feeling that by expressing their own grief they will upset others in the family. It is also fairly common for adolescents to be in a situation where they have to assume some responsibilities of the deceased. Group discussion can help them explore ways of adjusting to this demand in an appropriate manner. While the reality is that other family members must assume some additional responsibilities, it is

important to help support the adolescent in maintaining some of their status as a child in the family in order to avoid situations in which they adopt the full role of the deceased.

The topic of anniversaries will fluctuate in importance depending on the group members and their specific situations. At some point it is important to address the anniversary of the death, the funeral, or special dates in finding out about a terminal illness, etc. Birthdays of the student, the deceased, or other survivors might also take on additional meaning or have special significance. As her own birthday approached, one student shared the feeling that she never wanted to have another birthday cake because her mother had always baked a cake for her. Students need the reassurance that it is normal to re-experience more intense grief reactions at these times. And, group activity might focus upon providing additional support for individual members at these times.

The holidays are a similar topic which will be relevant for group members at certain times of the year. Some holidays might hold special meaning with regard to family traditions. In some instances the student might have already purchased or planned a gift for the deceased. It can be helpful for students to have some preparation for difficulties they might encounter over the holidays. Just knowing that renewed feelings of grief are likely to occur can be reassuring. Discussion of the holidays prior to their arrival can help students identify ways of coping with difficulties in advance. Suggestions such as setting aside times

to experience sad feelings and reviewing happy memories, or initiating talk about the deceased with family members can be helpful.

Funerals can be a very difficult topic for adolescents to address, and are likely to elicit more intense emotional reactions in the group meeting. However, the funeral is an important experience that students need the opportunity to talk about and share with other group members. At times it can be helpful for students to approach this topic by focusing on a more structured activity, such as sharing the obituary of the deceased or bringing in poems, etc. from the funeral service.

Finally, the group needs to address the topic of resolution. Group members need time to consider what it means to each of them to get over their loss. Experiences of individual group members can at times facilitate discussion and exploration of this issue. Graduation from high school, plans following graduation, and even the formation of new social relationships can help the students explore what it means to go on with their lives without involvement of the deceased. Discussion of resources, both personal and community, and exploration of their own feelings regarding adjustment to the loss are important before terminating the group activity. Within the high school this can include discussion of tentative plans to carry on group activities in the future, or even more focused projects in compiling lists of resources available for students in similar situations. One community bereavement group decided to make a video tape sharing their feelings and experiences

to offer support for other teens and to inform professionals in order that they might better understand what adolescents experience in this situation.

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